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Eyewitness Accounts and Political Claims: Transnational Responses to the 2009 Postelection Protests in Iran

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Following the June 2009 Iranian presidential election, images of mass protests throughout Iran flooded Western news media. Unlike the prevailing images that have represented Iran in the mainstream press over the past three decades, images of the 2009 demonstrations showed political dissension within the country; these images disrupted the familiar ones of masses of chador-clad women and angry men chanting “Death to America.” Black was replaced with a sea of green, and scenes of violence and police brutality were foregrounded. The use of social media became central to the emerging narrative about the potential for revolution or social change.

The growing ability of Iranians to videotape, photograph, and circulate images and events to a global audience through social media was made even more powerful by the near complete dependence of Western news agencies on such sources for information. In turn, Iranians in the United States have used these images—most important, the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan—as a rallying point to gather support for Iranian protesters and agitate for political change in Iran. During this time of increased geopolitical tension, Iran offers a critical site to examine the escalating battles between governments attempting to control media images and individuals attempting to disrupt that control. This article examines how such battles call into question the relationship between mass media and national identity and what this presages for the future of political action in the digital age.

In an examination of the differential uses of social media by protesters within Iran and Iranians outside Iran, the contradictory nature of digital media—as both evidentiary (because of its unmediated truth value) and indeterminate (because it is open to transformation and uncontrollable circulation)—becomes evident. This article analyzes the representation of social media as a form of “eyewitness account” and its related claims to truth. I examine how variously situated actors negotiate, navigate, and use these specific properties for political purposes. While protesters in Iran have mobilized transnational social media to organize politically in a context of strict government control of public places and media, Iranians in the diaspora have used social media to disrupt hegemonic narratives about Iran and articulate Iranian identities.

The 2009 Postelection Protests

The 2009 election was a media affair well before the outbreak of the protests. For the first time in Iranian history, televised debates between candidates were broadcast, and social media sites served as platforms for campaigning. Foreign reporters were covering Iran's first televised and highly mediated elections for weeks before the protests, and Iranian state media celebrated the state's transparent and participatory democratic political process.

On 12 June 2009, Iran's Interior Ministry announced that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected with two-thirds of the vote. In response, masses of people converged (without a legal permit to do so) on Tehran's main squares to protest the result, accusing the government of rigging the election.¹ The protests spread to other large cities throughout Iran. Although dismissed by both Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei (Iran's supreme leader), the demonstrations continued and, on some days, escalated into riots and police clashes. Images and signs of opposition candidates were visible, especially the green colors most demonstrators wore to signify support of Mir Hossein Mousavi, who used the color as the signature emblem for his presidential campaign.² Mousavi participated in and spoke at many of the rallies and, along with other opposition candidates, formally demanded a recount of the votes.³

International media already had a significant presence in Iran during the run-up to the election and immediately began covering the story in up-to-the-minute news reports, blogs, and broadcasts.⁴ Television reporters interviewed Iranians "on the ground" and emphasized the massive size and peaceful nature of the protests.

Iranian state media initially ignored news of the demonstrations, focusing instead on the huge voter turnout and what it deemed "healthy democracy" in Iran. Ahmadinejad's state address, which was televised on 13 June 2009, applauded the fact that 84 percent of eligible voters participated, describing this turnout as a "major blow to the oppressive world system and the psychological war launched by the enemy."⁵ He blamed "Western-led media hype" for the civil unrest, stating: "This is a great victory at a time and condition when the entire material, political, and propaganda facilities outside Iran were totally mobilized against the people and the heaviest pressure and psychological warfare organized against the people of Iran."⁶

The theme of Western media provoking the demonstrations was reiterated by Khamenei, who warned Iranians of the "behind-the-scenes moves by the enemy meant to spark riots in the streets" and called on opposition leaders to promote "unity and brotherhood."⁷ Unity was the theme of both Ahmadinejad's and Khamenei's speeches and sermons as they cast an authentic, democratic, and social justice-oriented Iran against oppressive and imperialist Western countries that sought its downfall. This familiar theme was also emphasized in state news stories and Iranian state satellite television about the protests in support of Ahmadinejad—protests that were described as "anti-West" and "unity" rallies.⁸ The increasing number of beaten and killed pro-Mousavi protesters was attributed to "unidentified gunmen" and hooligans; any responsibility on the part of the *basij* (described as "hard-line volunteer paramilitaries" on most news programs) was denied. In the Press TV news story "Several Killed at Pro-Mousavi Rally," for instance, victims were described as "attack-

1. Maidan-e Azadi (Freedom Square) was the main site for these protests in Tehran. It was also a main site of demonstrations during the Iranian revolution (1979–80).

2. Mousavi, the reformist candidate and the runner-up in the election, had served as Iran's prime minister (1981–89) during most of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88).

3. In the months following the June election, the opposition movement was often called the Green Movement, and green became a symbol used in protests both in Iran and around the world to signify support for the demonstrators and their demands.

4. In a statement by Iran's Foreign Ministry, the large presence of international reporters in Iran was "a sign of the total transparency in the trends of the elections and the effective performance of the system of religious democracy." Quoted in "Iran: Foreign Media Supporting 'Hooligans,'" CNN.com, 17 June 2009, www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/17/iran.journalists.

5. "President Joins Sea of Celebrations: Election a Blow to World Oppressors," *Keyhan International*, 15 June 2009, www.kayhanintl.com/.

6. *Ibid.*

7. "Leader Tells Mousavi to Pursue Protest Calmly, through Legal Channels," *Tehran Times*, 16 June 2009, www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=196811.

8. "In Tehran, Anti-West Protests Erupt Too," Press TV, 15 June 2009, www.presstv.ir/; "Ahmadinejad Supporters Hold Unity Rally," Press TV, 16 June 2009, www.presstv.ir/.

ers": "After the demonstrations were over, the attackers reportedly were trying to loot weapons and vandalize public properties when they were shot by unidentified gunmen."⁹ Following the growing violence in Iran, Western news coverage increasingly focused on the *basij*, reporting shootings and arrests, as well as international reactions to this violence. In an official statement about the situation, President Barack Obama said that "people's voices should be heard and not suppressed," and many expatriate Iranians interviewed in the mainstream media described the protests as attempts to overthrow the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last shah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, deposed in 1979), said in an interview: "The younger generation has had it. They are risking their lives in the streets of Iran to demonstrate to the regime that they are not going to take it anymore."¹¹ A similar sentiment was voiced by Azar Nafisi, who was regularly interviewed on international news. She stated that "[the protest movement] is great because it disproves the myth that Iranian people want the extreme laws imposed on them by the Islamic Regime," and she dismissed the Ahmadinejad supporters' claims to democracy.¹²

This public and mediated nature of the election events came to a halt following the increased international media focus on the state's violent suppression of the protests. The Iranian state attempted to control the global circulation of images from within the country by banning all foreign reporters from Iran. On 17 June 2009, the Iranian Foreign Ministry accused international journalists of being "mouthpieces of hooligans"—hooligans being countries that "support illegal gatherings" and "target the radiant face of the Islamic Republic."¹³ By 18 June most foreign press credentials were revoked and Iranians citizens were threatened with new restrictions related to using online media to report events or communicate with one another.¹⁴

This move did not, however, end global coverage of the violence within Iran. Rather, it highlighted the role of cell phone camera footage, digital cameras, and social media in circulating images from Iran to the world.

Most news stations and papers began to rely heavily on "social media" from Iran to "get the story." For example, CNN constantly referred in television broadcasts to its "iReport" section where it posted "amateur" video from Iran. In a news broadcast on CNN International, analyst Errol Barnett reported:

We are also getting iReports from people on the ground, and what we're hearing from iReporters in Iran is, number one, they don't want to be identified by name—they're afraid of what government forces might do, so they're giving us pseudonyms to use for them. Number two, they are saying that in some instances, Twitter is being blocked, Facebook is being blocked, but they're finding that iReport is not being blocked. So we want to encourage anyone in Iran at a pro-Ahmadinejad rally or a pro-Mousavi rally—show us your eyewitness accounts because we cannot actually report from the ground; so this could be an important tool so we could see the story as it unfolds.¹⁵

The *New York Times*, Guardian Online, *Los Angeles Times*, and CNN regularly provided information that allowed users in Iran to upload video or updates on the situation. These sites, and the news programs themselves, relied on digital media to track events in Iran, and many news shows included segments where the anchor would explain images being shown on YouTube on a monitor. In a news story on CNN's Web site, iReport videos were used to describe the situation in Iran:

Another image on CNN's iReport site shows the body of a man who has suffered a huge gash to his side. The man was 25, the description said, and was martyred because of his belief in

9. "Several Killed near Pro-Mousavi Rally," Press TV, 16 June 2009, www.presstv.ir/.

10. "Obama Says Iran Should Not Suppress People's Voices," Reuters, 16 June 2009, www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE55F4TK20090616.

11. Will Dunham, "Shah's Son Sees Iran Protests as Threat to Regime," Reuters India, 17 June 2009, in www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-40382420090616.

12. "For me, elections in a country such as Iran don't have the same meaning in countries such as the U.S. . . . a sizeable number of people [in Iran] can't even vote and they will vote for Ahmadinejad." Azar Nafisi, interview by Kathleen McCaul, "Iranian Writer on Poll Results," Aljazeera.net, 14 June 2009, english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009613181040285185.

13. "Iran: Foreign Media Supporting 'Hooligans.'"

14. Brian Stelter and Mark Landler, "Washington Taps into a Potent New Force in Diplomacy," *New York Times*, 16 June 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/world/middleeast/17media.html.

15. Errol Barnett, "Avoiding Iran's Web Block," CNN Breaking News, 16 June 2009, edition.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/world/2009/06/16/barnett.iran.web.blocks.cnn.html.

freedom. In yet another video, posted without a description, a screaming crowd surrounds a man's body. CNN is not identifying iReporters who post content from inside Iran. [. . .] One iReporter noted that Mousavi supporters are still able to organize rallies through person-to-person contact. Many Internet sites are blocked, and cell phones lack service in some areas, the person said.¹⁶

Many Western news reports also questioned the digital media being used to "show the world" what was taking place in Iran. For example, reporters and mainstream news Web sites were careful not to make conclusive statements about the images they posted or confirm where and when the events videotaped took place. In some cases, the "truth" of the reports was itself in question because of the fact that digital media images could easily be manipulated. For example, a photograph of an Ahmadinejad rally circulated online until it was concluded on the Daily Kos (via a Twitter feed) that it was "Photoshopped" (i.e., manipulated to appear larger).¹⁷ In the months following the election, Internet users offered their own evidence through eyewitness accounts and photographs to discredit globally circulated images, statements, and videos coming out of Iran.¹⁸ For example, readers of the *New York Times*' Lede blog wrote that information posted by the National Iranian-American Council (NIAC) on their blog about Ali Reza Tosali, a young boy who had died recently, was incorrect. The NIAC posted a photograph of the boy and stated that he was killed at the demonstrations on 30 July 2009. In response, Lede blog readers posted a photograph of a death announcement posted on the boy's home in Tehran that stated 30 June 2009 as the

day of his funeral wake. Such instances of confirming and discrediting information transnationally through the use of digital images point to the simultaneous "truth value" and indeterminacy of digital media.

One of the most tragic and vivid images that came out of Iran shortly after the media ban was cell phone camera footage of a young woman who was shot to death in the middle of a protest. Within hours, the video went viral and was broadcast on major news networks around the world. In less than a day, the woman's identity was revealed, and her name, Neda, which means "voice" in Persian, was interpreted by Western media as a symbol for the violent suppression of Iran's real (i.e., the opposition's) voice.¹⁹

The global circulation of and response to this video reveals the contested terrain of transnational images of Iran. In response to the video, Obama emphasized the inability of the Iranian state to suppress such images: "In 2009, no iron fist is strong enough to shut off the world from bearing witness to the peaceful pursuit of justice."²⁰ The global omnipresence of the image of Agha-Soltan's death forced the Iranian state to respond—initially, by denying the event. State television broadcast an interview with an Iranian family who claimed that Agha-Soltan was their daughter and that she was alive and well, studying abroad in Canada. On a global scale, the Iranian government broadcast an English-language documentary on satellite television that claimed that forensic evidence from the scene of Agha-Soltan's death contradicts the theory that she was shot. Finally, in an interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, the Iranian ambassador to Mexico suggested that

16. "Witnesses Describe Violence in Iran as Protesters Stand Firm," CNN.com, 17 June 2009, www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/17/iran.eye.witnesses/index.html.

17. A similar situation resulted from the circulation of a scanned letter from the Interior Ministry that confirmed Mousavi's presidential victory. The letter was presented as proof that the election was rigged. See Tucker Reals, "Does Letter Prove Iran Election Fraud?" CBS News, 18 June 2009, www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/06/18/world/worldwatch/entry5095195.shtml.

18. For example, Press TV, the Islamic Republic's international English news program broadcast via satellite television, reported that no protests took place at Ahmadinejad's inauguration and quoted the deputy police chief of Iran as saying, "Despite the propaganda by satellite television channels and foreign media . . . no illegal protests took place." "Ahmadinejad Sworn in As Police 'Block' Protesters," Press TV, 5 August 2009, edition.presstv.ir/detail/102614.html. In response to this report, YouTube videos were posted showing such protests, and news reports from Reuters and the *New York Times* cited "witnesses in Tehran" who described protests outside Iran's Parliament during the inauguration. Parisa Hafezi and Zahra Hosseinian, "Protests as Ahmadinejad Sworn in as President," Reuters, 5 August 2009,

www.reuters.com/article/2009/08/05/us-iran-idUSTRE5735QE20090805.

19. Since then, Neda Agha-Soltan's image has reappeared as a symbol in protests around the world, and demonstrations were organized around dates commemorating her death (e.g., the Shiite tradition of commemorating a death on the fortieth day). See Abbas Milani, "Neda Agha-Sultan and Iran's Opposition," *New Republic*, 21 July 2009, www.tnr.com/blog/the-plank/neda-gha-sultan-and-iran-squos-opposition.

20. Philip Webster and Tom Baldwin, "Barack Obama Strikes Out as Tehran Tightens its 'Iron Fist,'" *Times Online* (London), 24 June 2009, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6564895.ece.

the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was involved in the shooting. The indeterminacy of digital media also raised concerns about the video outside of Iran, leading reporters to track the source of the video and uncover information about Agha-Soltan.²¹

Western news coverage focused on the importance of making the story public and finding accurate ways to characterize the nature of the protests in Iran. As the protests continued into a second week, stories increasingly focused on *who* the protesters were and whether they were representative of all Iranians. The struggle over the meaning of the protests grew over the following months among diasporic Iranians. Iranians both inside and outside Iran debated their interpretations of the events in editorials, Web blogs, Web sites, and online forums and at political gatherings and public lectures. In this context, the use of social media enabled Iranians outside Iran to communicate with family within Iran about daily events without running the risk of using telephones. This ability to keep abreast of events in Iran through photographs, videos, Facebook updates, tweets, and, to a lesser extent, e-mails provided a form of “citizen journalism” that seemed to evade both the bias of professional reporters and the censorship of the Iranian government. Before considering the diasporic responses and uses of this citizen journalism, it is useful to examine the media landscape in postrevolution Iran and its relationship to the Iranian diaspora.

Distrust and Media in Iran

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1980, television in Iran came under the control of the supreme leader and was described in the Islamic Republic’s constitution as a tool to “serve the diffusion of Islamic culture in pursuit of the evolutionary course of the Islamic Revolu-

tion.”²² All domestic television and radio stations are state run. Satellite television provides an illegal but widespread alternative to this programming.²³ Satellite dishes first appeared in the northern neighborhoods of Tehran in 1991, setting off a vigorous debate in newspapers and within the Interior Ministry.²⁴ In line with the general criticisms of Western media following the Islamic Revolution’s program of cleansing the nation of “internal impurities” and external threats of “cultural invasion,” satellite television was blamed for corrupting youth and weakening religious belief. Satellite dishes have been banned since 1995, but they continue to be common in households throughout Iran.²⁵

While conducting fieldwork in Iran between 2006 and 2008, I observed a strong distrust of domestic media among lower-middle-class, middle-class, and wealthy Iranians I met in Tehran. Specifically, many people complained about the limited amount of news coverage of political unrest within the country, religious propaganda in international reporting, and a selective representation of facts relating to domestic economic and political issues. Rouzbeh, a thirty-two-year-old doctor I interviewed in Iran, explained his frustration at the “lack of information” available in Iran because of government control of media:

In Iran’s political scene, forget us, we’re nothing—people much more important and bigger could not do anything. Even an official party, with the media—like radio, like TV, you have to have these things to get your word out. How could they do that? Web sites? Web blogs? Closed, closed, closed, closed. So, even if they let you do your work, how could you reach the people? That’s the problem with the information we get—from the state-controlled Seda va Sima, the people of Iran are “monotone” people—their “data input” only comes from one source . . . So, returning to your question of what

21. See the HBO documentary *For Neda*, directed by Antony Thomas (2010); screened at Los Angeles Press Club, 7 June 2010.

22. To this end, media outlets were to be used as a forum for “healthy encounter of different ideas, but they must strictly refrain from diffusion and propagation of destructive and anti-Islamic practices.” Iran’s eight local channels consist entirely of government programming: censored and dubbed American movies, news programs, football games, sermons and interviews with religious leaders, and govern-

ment speeches and conferences. See also the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, chapter 12, “Radio and Television,” article 175.

23. The Iranian parliament passed a law against using or trading any kind of satellite equipment on 12 January 1995.

24. See Fardin Alikhah, “The Politics of Satellite Television in Iran,” in *Media, Culture, and Society in Iran*, ed. Mehdi Semati (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2008), 95–96.

25. While I was in Tehran in 2007, confiscation of satellite dishes and fines became a regular occurrence. Accurate numbers for satellite users in Tehran are understandably impossible to come by, but the recent documentary *Baad-E-Daboor* (*Head Wind*, dir. Mohammad Rasoulof, 2007) shows that satellite television use is incredibly widespread—and even extends to rural regions of the country. This widespread use has also been documented in recent ethnographies and news reports on Iran.

impact new media has had, in the social body: none. None! It hasn't done anything. And even if we thought that it did, it has been filtered. The intelligence has filtered it. BBC Farsi is filtered, Rooz online is filtered. Orkut, even! And then you need proxies. So, both in terms of software and hardware—I mean, the software doesn't even exist here for me to get past this to get information. We don't have any input.²⁶

This sentiment was consistent with the survey results I collected in Tehran on perceived credibility of various media sources. In these surveys, most respondents ranked domestic news sources (e.g., Keyhan, Resalat, Seda va Sima) as “unreliable” and, in contrast, Voice of America, Internet sites, Web blogs, and BBC Persian as “very credible” sources of news.²⁷ Even though Iranian American satellite television programming was generally described as heavily biased and politically interested, it was widely watched in the homes I visited in Tehran. The relationship between Iranians in Iran and the diaspora has been strongly influenced by this presence in the domestic realm.

Iranian expatriate satellite television's reception in Iran began in September 2000 as a result of the accidental transmission of the National Iran Television Network by Eutelsat, the station's French satellite company.²⁸ By 2003 eleven Persian satellite television networks (nine based in the United States and two in England) were broadcasting to Iran.²⁹ Of the eleven stations, four broadcast entertainment content and the rest broadcast primarily political content or, more specifically, political content in opposition

to the Islamic Republic.³⁰ In addition to voicing explicitly oppositional views, these stations also served as a source of information about domestic issues for Iranians in Iran, as all domestic and external broadcasting in Iran is controlled by the state organization Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), whose director the supreme leader, Khamenei, appoints. Civilian unrest and student protests are never covered by domestic news or radio, impeding the possibilities for large-scale participation.

When protests began in June 2003 at the University of Tehran in opposition to plans to privatize Iran's universities, satellite broadcasters became a key source of information about the protests for people in Iran. The potential political dangers that this transnational connection posed to the Islamic regime became especially apparent when satellite programs from the United States supported student protests at the University of Tehran by following the demonstrations around the clock, taking calls from Tehran, and calling on Iranians to join the protests. This coverage was especially significant given the recent memory of violent repression of student protests at the University of Tehran in July 1999.³¹ Stations such as NITV, PARS TV, Channel One, and VOA Persian not only gave extensive coverage of the protests by taking calls from Iran and encouraging others to support the demonstrations but also claimed to have been instrumental in encouraging the demonstrations.

The viewer's ability to direct the televisual flow of satellite programs through telephone

26. Rouzbeh, interview by the author, Tehran, 15 January 2008. His name has been replaced with this pseudonym. He runs a private practice in a wealthy area of Tehran, where our interviews took place. In our interview he described himself as a “bourgeoisie.” He and his wife also own an apartment in an affluent neighborhood of Tehran.

27. The surveys were conducted in Tehran, December 2008–April 2009, during my dissertation fieldwork. The paper surveys consisted of approximately fifteen questions relating to media use and ratings of credibility of news sources. Snowball sampling was used, and as a result, I had limited access to government supporters, state elites, and low-income and poor Iranians. While the survey cannot be generalized to a large population within Iran, these general trends were common themes I encountered during my fieldwork in Tehran among lower-middle-class, middle-class, and moderately wealthy Iranians—in

particular, media are primarily consumed in the domestic realm, satellite television is popular, and Internet sources and nonstate media are considered more credible sources of news than are state television, radio, and newspapers.

28. The Iranian government's continued engagement with the threat of foreign influence through media and its international image has played an important part in how it has dealt with Los Angeles–based Iranian satellite television in Iran.

29. The following lists the stations broadcast from the United States and their launch dates: NITV (1999), ITN1 (2000), PARS TV (2001), Channel One (2002), VOA Persian (2003), Apadana (2003), IPN (2003), Jam-e-Jam International (2003), and Tapes 1 (2003). Broadcast from England are New Channel and Simay-e-Azadi, both launched in 2003.

30. Stations broadcasting entertainment content are ITN1, IPN, Jam-e-Jam International, and Tapes 1. The other stations broadcast primarily political content, with the exception of Voice of America (VOA Persian), which broadcasts U.S. policies.

31. The protests began in support of press reform and resulted in a police raid on the University of Tehran dormitory complex and six days of street riots—the biggest in the twenty-year history of the Islamic Republic. Although the events were not broadcast on national television, images from the extensive state violence have since circulated online, especially during the yearly commemoration of the event. For a chronology of events, see “Issue Paper: Iran July 1999 Protests in Tehran,” Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, December 2000, www.cisr.gc.ca/eng/pages/index.aspx.

calls draws attention to the eyewitness nature of accounts from Iran and how they allow for a spread of information within the country. Satellite programs have often been used to alert Iranians to the locations of political demonstrations or allow families of victims of state brutality to publicize their plight. Maryam, a twenty-nine-year-old woman I interviewed in Tehran, explained how satellite television informed people in Iran about the student protests and police brutality that they would otherwise not be able to confirm:

On that side they [Western media] would show the images from the protests. On the foreign channels—people sent video from here and through the Internet. There was also video footage online, of the beatings, the raids, they showed the protests—they showed video footage of the protests and were broadcasting it. Here on the [domestic] news they didn't show the protests at all. Like, two or three days later they just said that at night, a bunch of hooligans raided the university dorm.³²

The use of the interactive call-in features of satellite programs during the 2003 protests prefigures the ways in which social media have been used following the June 2009 postelection protests. Citing the government filtering of Internet Web sites and control of media, Los Angeles-based satellite television hosts highlighted their role in spreading information coming from inside Iran to viewers in Iran in 2003.³³ In a telephone interview with the *New York Times*, Persian-language Channel One's host Shahram Homayoon explained that most programming was dedicated to fielding calls from Iran. Similarly, in an Associated Press report, Azadi Television's Reza Fazeli described how "phones were lit up and faxes were pouring in from Iran" within minutes of his request for information about the protests.³⁴ According to the article, a twenty-eight-year-old caller to his show explained that "with satellite TV channels, we can see what is

happening and we can tell other friends." Calls are fielded on the air, allowing people to "speak for themselves," thereby avoiding accusations of biased reporting and instead enabling what is often termed "citizen journalism." In a Pacific News Service Report, Mehdi Zokaei, publisher of the online newspaper *Javanan International Weekly*, emphasized this point: "Everyone has become a reporter [in Iran]—we get stories faxed to us without any address. We let the pictures speak for themselves rather than use words."³⁵

The role of eyewitness accounts—through telephone calls, photographs, and video footage—serves as proof of the events being reported. In Maryam's account of watching the coverage of the 2003 protests on satellite television, she emphasized the calls from people in Iran:

[On the satellite television programs] they were saying, "Go, support these youth. Now that the youth have made a move, support them, now is the right time to do something. Like you did the time of the revolution, now is the time to go to the front, don't leave them alone." One boy called, crying. Well, some of the calls are lies, that's obvious, but this guy was crying and saying, "They took my sister, they beat her, I couldn't stop them, people please help me"—there were these calls too, I mean, truth or lie, I don't know. The point is that they push it so that eventually people get emotional and go [join the protests].

. . . These parents called in to say that they were just told that their child, who has been in prison for the past five years, died. They only found out about his whereabouts a few months ago. They said that four months ago they were contacted by the prison because he caught a bad illness in jail and they wouldn't even take him to the prison hospital. He also attempted suicide twice in jail. They finally called the parents to come see him as he was dying. As the mother was recounting this, she was screaming. The mother and the father . . . I don't know if it was true, but it was someone that everyone knew—

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32. Maryam, interview by the author, Tehran. The name is a pseudonym.

33. See Li Fellers and Azadeh Moaveni, "Iranian TV from LA Is a Regime-Change Hotbed," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 2003, articles.latimes.com/2003/jun/18/local/me-irantv18.

34. Quoted in Sandra Marquez, "L.A.-based Satellite TV Is Crucial Link for Protesters in Iran," Associated Press, 20 June 2003, www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/932951/posts.

35. Sandip Roy, "When Iranian American Media Shout, Iran Listens," Pacific News Service, 19 June 2003, news.pacificnews.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=2489442d25971dd311e3937731cd2c7a.

their son was famous, they [people on satellite television] would talk about him a lot. He was one of the known protesters. He died, the poor guy. The parents were just going crazy.³⁶

This description of the effect of watching satellite television emphasizes both the significance of the eyewitness account (which is enabled by telephone technology embedded in the television medium) as a way of circumventing state media and its unreliability, because of the impossibility of verifying the information (in both accounts, Maryam offers a disclaimer: “I mean, truth or lie, I don’t know” and “I don’t know if it was true”). In my research, I have found that similar concerns have been raised over the evidentiary nature of eyewitness accounts via social media, which demonstrates the continuity between earlier uses of media by Iranians in Iran and the more recent uses of Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and other Web sites.

Contrary to many celebratory descriptions of social media enabling a “revolution” in Iran, or serving as a catalyst for political action in mainstream accounts, the interactive use of media has in fact been a significant feature of the Iranian transnational realm since the Iranian revolution, used strategically by Iranians in Iran. In those cases, sources outside Iran were able to provide those within Iran a means to get around government censorship—especially of political events taking place. What had changed by the 2009 protests was the international attention on Iran through Western mainstream media, placing the images coming out of Iran on a global stage. The emergence of social media—such as Facebook, Twitter, and digital video footage uploaded to Web sites—has also signaled a shift from the earlier focus on telephone and photographs recirculated through satellite television broadcasts. Social media seem to offer a way for Iranians within the country to circumvent government censors without an outside mediator (e.g., satellite television), but a closer examination of how social media were actually used sug-

gests that the overriding distrust of media and the state in Iran worked to limit this possibility. In the next section, I explore this issue in more detail, before shifting to an examination of how diasporic Iranians used media to participate in the global postelection protests.

Social Media in the Postelection Protests in Iran

During the 2009 postelection protests, Iranians in Iran were using social media not only to “make the story public” but also to mobilize within the country. Because all major media in Iran is state controlled, protesters found it difficult to coordinate demonstration meeting places and warn of clashes with police. Internet sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook became important for posting such information.³⁷ The issue of authenticity came up repeatedly on these sites, as fears of government spies impersonating protesters and posting false information circulated online. In these cases, warnings were sent through “trusted” Twitter users and postings on Facebook. The use of social media to mobilize within the country parallels the use of satellite television broadcasts (and their use of telephones and faxes) during the 2003 protests in Tehran. This use of media suggests that many of the demonstrations are oriented to an inside audience, with goals related to political change within Iran that do not call on the involvement of outsiders.

Candidates running against Ahmadinejad relied heavily on Internet, short message service (SMS), and word of mouth, as radio, television, and newspapers were regulated by the state. Reformist candidate Mousavi used Facebook as a tool for political organizing and campaigning, and pro-reformists’ Web sites provided sites to circumvent government censorship. Leading up to and following the June 2009 presidential elections, Internet and SMS service were interrupted, and the Web sites of reformist candidates were blocked by Iranian authorities in February and March of 2009.³⁸

36. Maryam, interview.

37. Brian Stelter, “In Coverage of Iran, Amateurs Take the Lead,” *New York Times*, 17 June 2009, media.decoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/in-coverage-of-iran-amateurs-take-the-lead.

38. As of 2008, there were approximately 23 million Internet users in Iran (about 35 percent of the population), a significantly higher number than the average in the Middle East. According to the 2009 Open Net Initiative report on Internet filtering in Iran, the number of Internet users in Iran has increased at an annual average rate of 48 percent, from under 1 million in 2000 to approximately 23 million in 2008, and

“Iran has continued to consolidate its position as one of the most extensive filterers of the Internet,” routing all public Internet traffic through proxy servers to filter specific Web pages and keywords. “Report on Internet Filtering in Iran,” Open Net Initiative, 16 June 2009, opennet.net/research/profiles/iran. On the blocking of Web sites in 2009, see Reporters Without Borders, “Massive Censorship Accom-

After the revocation of the majority of foreign press credentials on 18 June 2009, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube became not only an important source of news for mainstream media broadcasts but also a central component of the news story of the protests themselves.³⁹ It is worth examining the ways in which social media have served the different purposes of enabling the flow of information within the country among some protesters and facilitating communication with Iranians outside Iran. In both these cases, anxieties over the indeterminacy of authorship and the decontextualization of information have been integral parts in the simultaneous use of social media as eyewitness account and for political mobilization. Twitter feeds from Iran suggest that protesters have used tweets as a way to warn one another of dangers by publicizing police violence, blocked roads, police raids, and tactics, as these feeds from @persiankiwi Twitter stream demonstrate:

reports of gun shots in Sadatabad too—we heard gunshots from that direction about 45 mins ago (15 June, 2:49 p.m.)

pedestrians avoid military baraks [sic] off Pasdaran St—something is going to happen from there (15 June, 1:06 p.m.)

Gohardasht in Karaj—confirmed—people in the street battles with militia (15 June, 12:59 p.m.)

anyone with camera or laptop is attacked in street (16 June 12:02 a.m.)

just in from Baharestan Sq—situation today is terrible—they beat the ppl like animals⁴⁰ (24 June, 6:34 a.m.)

These feeds are from @Change_For_Iran Twitter stream:

they were waiting for us—they all have guns and riot uniforms—it was like a mouse trap (24 June, 6:53 a.m.)

it looks they are going to attack dorms again! IRG's [Iranian revolutionary Guard] chopper just passed by Yousefabad. there is noting [sic] left to destroy over there! (16 June, 7:55 a.m.)

IRG threaten to open fire at people if they try to participate in Mousavi's rally⁴¹ (15 June, 2:21 a.m.)

Twitter was also used to spread announcements for Mousavi supporters and publicize upcoming demonstrations, as were these from @persiankiwi Twitter stream:

confirmed—tomorrow Haft Teer Sq at 4pm pro mousavi\freedom—carry flowers for baseej—no confrontation (16 June, 11:40 a.m.)

confirmed—only official mousavi march is today valli asr to jaam jam⁴² (16 June, 4:33 a.m.)

These are from @MOUSAVI1388 Twitter stream:

Next peaceful protest, Tomorrow (05 Aug.), 9 am, Baharestan Sq. in front of parliament (4 August, 7:24 a.m.)

URGNT@ ALL jorlnlsts, Tday 15:30 Prss Conf. in Tehran, Sadr MotrWay, Kave Shomali Blvd, Roshanayi St, Bahar Shomali St. Num. 9⁴³ (16 June, 2:31 a.m.)

Facebook was used in similar ways, as Twitter messages were reposted as Facebook updates and events were posted on popular pages, such as Mousavi's Facebook page (which has more than 126,900 fans).⁴⁴ Facebook, like many so-

panies Ahmadinejad 'Victory,'" 3 June 2009, www.rsf.org/Massive-censorship-accompanies.html; and Rebekah Heacock and Rob Faris, "Cracking Down on Digital Communication and Political Organizing in Iran," Open Net Initiative Blog, 15 June 2009, opennet.net/blog/2009/06/cracking-down-digital-communication-and-political-organizing-iran.

39. See "Iran's Twitter Revolution," *Washington Times*, 16 June 2009, www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution; and Brad Stone and Noam Cohen, "Social Networks Spread Defiance Online," *New York Times*, 16 June 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/world/middle-east/16media.html.

40. twitter.com/PersianKiwi (accessed 19 June 2009). As of January 2010, PersianKiwi had more than thirty-one thousand followers. It is worth noting that while a Twitter location could be set to Iran, there is no way to confirm whether the tweet is in fact coming from someone in Iran.

41. @Change_for_Iran Twitter Stream, twitter.com/Change_for_Iran (accessed 19 June 2009). As of January 2010, Change_for_Iran had more than twenty-five thousand followers.

42. twitter.com/PersianKiwi (accessed 19 June 2009).

43. @MOUSAVI1388 Twitter Stream, twitter.com/MOUSAVI1388 (accessed 19 June 2009). As of January 2010, MOUSAVI1388 had more than twenty-seven thousand followers.

44. On this page, visitors are able to read updates, contact Mousavi through e-mail, link to his Twitter account, view photo albums (such as "Governmental Violence" or "Showing Green Power") and videos, and find recommended sources for information, specifically, Iranian Web sites. While the number of fans suggests the page's popularity, it is not necessary to be a fan in order to view the page.

cial media that are used to publicize events in Iran, emphasizes the eyewitness account, as people send messages about direct observation (in many cases, not specifying whether they observed something directly or were told about an event by a firsthand observer), post photographs, and send video footage by cell phone. These forms of media provide a stark contrast both to the constant stream of state media, generally discussed as untrustworthy, and to commentary through expatriate media, also often dismissed as politically biased. The significance of eyewitness accounts also facilitates a form of communication already commonplace in the context of strict government control of public spaces, namely, word of mouth, rumors, and, more recently, SMS.

An ever-present danger related to such informal circulation of information, however, is the possibility of false information, especially in the cases of social media (like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube), where information is open to decontextualization and manipulation and where authorship and authenticity are indeterminate. For example, a common theme of Twitter is the threat of government agents using Twitter as a means of trapping, framing, or threatening users, as these messages from @Change_For_Iran Twitter stream show:

there are now rumors of mousavi's site being hacked and the whole rally is IRG's trap. gun placements at azadi square confirmed (15 June, 3:07 a.m.)

Please note I never said anything about creating any type of hand bomb or weapons or killing basiji or police! there are all false! (19 June, 4:44 a.m.)

Please RT with my username, they already know about this account and at least it would reduce the number of false RTs & I can block them⁴⁵ (19 June, 4:43 a.m.)

45. twitter.com/CHange_for_Iran (accessed 19 June 2009).

46. twitter.com/PersianKiwi (accessed 19 June 2009).

47. See Tehran Bureau Web site, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/us. The message is from twitter.com/Tehranbureau (accessed 19 June 2009).

This one is from @persiankiwi: “only official march today is valli asr. others may be a trap—avoid others” (16 June, 3:24 a.m.).⁴⁶ In one representative case, the Twitter user Change_for_Iran tweeted “according to rumor Mousavi requested all people to gather near his office at 12:30pm today”—a message that was tagged as a trap by the Tehran Bureau, a news site based in Massachusetts, which describes itself as an independent news organization comprising journalists and “Iran experts” and is formally affiliated with PBS: “@Change_for_Iran this is a trap! If you don't believe me then check with mousavi sites. Order is to hold back until word. Pls RT” (13 June, 11:22 a.m.).⁴⁷ The Tehran Bureau has also used its Twitter account and Web site to alert people in Iran of other possible dangers related to “fake tweets”; for example, in a “Sunday Iran Alert” they warned:

Ghلامnews, Mousavi's official setad site, has officially confirmed the march along Valiasr tomorrow (Monday) and a national strike on Tuesday. PLEASE FWD THIS NEWS TO ALL. Also, pls post on Facebook—it is blocked, but many can bypass filter and access it. (14 June, 11:39 a.m.)

There is another rumor going around that the basij has stationed SNIPERS on valiasr . . . this may be a scare tactic rumor, but it is not unlikely . . . which makes things so much more deadly. This should also be warned so people see how brutal the regime is prepared to be—worse than the Shah's army.⁴⁸ (14 June, 11:39 a.m.)

On the same day the Tehran Bureau also sent out a Twitter message alerting people that its own site had been infiltrated: “sorry tehran-bureau.com down. we got hacked and have to repair. if your comments do not get published over the next few hours, please resend” (14 June, 9 a.m.).⁴⁹

These concerns over authenticity highlight the features of digital media that make

48. “Iran Sunday Alerts,” 14 June 2009, Tehran Bureau, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/06/sunday-iran-alerts.html.

49. twitter.com/Tehranbureau (accessed 19 June 2009).

social media both trustworthy and potentially dangerous. While providing an “unmediated” and therefore more “real” account of events (e.g., through personal accounts and cell phone uploads), the inability to verify authorship, and the potential for images and messages to be decontextualized, makes these accounts potentially untrustworthy. These conditions, which are not new in the context of the highly regulated public spaces in postrevolution Iran, point to the importance of offline social networks in validating information. For instance, video footage uploaded to a Web site could be validated by identifying its source through a social frame of reference (i.e., a friend, relative, classmate, etc.). As a result of the strict control of public spaces in Iran by the state, a broad sense of distrust of what you see in public, or on the surface, is common. During my fieldwork in Tehran, I observed a sharp contrast between public spaces and the domestic realm in people’s everyday lives.⁵⁰ Since no public sphere for free political speech exists in Iran, oppositional political views are almost always expressed in the home and to one’s close friends and family members. Expressing an opinion in public, and to a stranger, always involves an element of danger. Could the cab driver be a *basij*? Could an untrustworthy listener find out about illegal activities, such as having a party, buying alcohol, or selling banned DVDs? The deliberate ambiguity of one’s public facade makes it difficult to distinguish between strangers and those who are “like you” and therefore trustworthy. Along with a careful awareness of one’s comportment and opinions, being in public in Iran also involves reading others and behaving appropriately.⁵¹

Extended networks of friends and kin therefore become important resources in navigating information. While research data on the postelection protests in Iran are still needed, it

would be a mistake to assume that social media are necessarily privileged over the use of word of mouth, phone calls, and SMS. As images on Rahesabz.net (one of the main protest movement Web sites) illustrate, graffiti in public places, such as bank machines and walls, messages written on currency, and stickers with political messages posted in public places, are all important tactics for spreading information through informal means. These examples of using public space subversively are not new in the Iranian context.

Diasporic Claims to Community

The Iranian postelection protests also existed as a transnational media event—one that compelled Iranians around the world to participate in its production. In this section I examine how the majority of Iranian immigrants and the second generation of Iranian Americans saw their role largely as mediating and publicizing the events of the Iranian election and its aftermath. To represent the events taking place in Iran to a global stage, however, it becomes necessary to interpret the events and give meaning to the images coming out of Iran. Divisions that have long existed within the Iranian immigrant population made it difficult to establish consensus on the meaning of the election results and the protests that ensued. These struggles were reflected in the demonstrations that took place in countries where Iranian immigrants lived, as well as in cyberspace, where the issues were debated on both English- and Persian-language Web sites.

The diasporic response to the protests is in some ways a continuation of a transnational relationship established after the fall of the shah’s government and the subsequent mass migration of Iranians abroad. Over the past three decades, Iranian immigrants have been

50. Dissertation fieldwork, conducted between 2006 and 2008.

51. In one particularly long cab ride across Tehran, I watched as the young, twenty-something driver reacted to the various passengers he picked up and dropped off. When I got in the cab, he heard my obviously foreign accent and resumed playing his compact disc (CD) of Iranian underground music. When he stopped to pick up an older woman who was dressed in a relatively conservative chador, he turned the music off. The woman turned to me and

said that she thought it was ridiculous that the police had made it illegal for young women to wear their boots over their jeans (this was a popular topic, as at the time this trend led to a renewed crackdown on *hijab* violations). I hesitantly agreed, and she continued to air her frustrations about how much “young people suffer in Iran.” Feeling more confident that the woman was not conservative (and hence would not be offended by the music), the driver resumed playing his CD. With each new passenger, this routine was reperformed.

forceful in participating in and responding to events in Iran through various media.⁵² The 2003 University of Tehran protests, for example, spurred a large-scale reaction on satellite television, online, and in demonstrations in cities where significant numbers of Iranians lived. In 2009, much like in 2003, opposing events and demonstrations were held, signifying the divisions within Iranian communities at these various locations.

In other ways, however, the responses to the 2009 protests signal a shift from what came before. What is new in the case of the postelection protests, as outlined in the first part of this article, is the specificity of social media (especially with regard to its construction of the eyewitness), as well as the tremendous international attention paid to Iran in mainstream Western media—both factors are important. First, the specific features of social media have vastly increased the speed and volume of information transmission from Iran to the outside world. Second, the framing of social media as having a significant role in the election protests and the constant stream of photographs and video footage of violence from Iran have placed the protests on a “global stage.” These factors have made it more difficult for Iranian immigrants to assume the role of mediating these images or, more generally, controlling their circulation. As has been the case over the past three decades (and most evidently in times of hostile geopolitical relations between Iran and the United States), the global image of Iran is vitally important to Iranian immigrants, not only because of their continued investments in the “homeland,” but because their very identities as Iranian immigrants depend on the signifier “Iran.”

Finally, differences within Iranian immigrant populations not only reflect differences of religious orientation, political affiliations, and time of migration but, in the context of shifting immigration patterns, also have increasingly re-

flected generational differences between early Iranian migrants and the more recent wave of graduate student and temporary work migrants. The latter group has grown up with the presence of diasporic Iranians through satellite television and state characterizations of them and, as a result, has identified against this earlier generation.

“Raising Awareness” as Political Action

Immediately following the large-scale postelection demonstrations in Iran, Iranians around the world organized local protests to draw international attention to the political unrest in Iran and the apparent illegitimacy of the elections. This response became particularly urgent as Iran grew more violent every day, with reports of official and unofficial police arrests, beatings, and, in some cases, the shooting of protesters. The Internet became a vital resource for broadcasting information about missing people, police brutality, and arrests of prominent activists from Iran to the “international community.” In addition to protests and candlelight vigils in many communities, Iranian immigrants also gave news interviews and participated in public forums and online debates about the events in Iran.

Images, videos, and information from Iran circulated with explosive rapidity among Iranian immigrants through social media—particularly on Facebook in the days and weeks following the election in Iran. In addition to organizing public demonstrations of support for Iranian protesters in North America and Europe, new forms of online activity came to be construed as “political action.” For example, on Facebook, many Iranians changed their profile photos to photographs related to the protests in Iran (images of police brutality, protesters), to messages such as “Where Is My Vote?” and to the color green (to identify with the Green Movement) or black (as a symbol of mourning),

52. During the 1999 student protests in Iran, for example, Iranians acquired information through telephone calls with relatives, as well as photographs that circulated from Iran to mainstream Western news agencies. In 2003 the Internet and satellite television played a critical role in allowing direct communication with protesters in Iran. Political events organized in the diaspora prominently featured photos of police violence uploaded through the Internet.

or even to images of Agha-Soltan's face covered in blood. Many Facebook users also changed their last names on their profiles to "*Irani*" (Iranian). Status updates reflected an investment in publicizing events in Iran to a global stage. On Twitter, similar changes were made to profile pictures and updates. Additionally, many Twitter users outside Iran changed the location on their profile to Iran. This move not only signaled solidarity with Iranians in Iran but was an attempt to make it more difficult for the Iranian government to crackdown on Twitter users in Iran.

My analysis of online "activism," surveys, and interviews with Iranian immigrants who participated in postelection demonstrations in their communities showed an emphasis on "raising awareness" as a political imperative. An online survey I conducted revealed that among respondents (all of whom identify as Iranian or Iranian American and are currently residing outside Iran), raising awareness was the primary reason for their presence at postelection protests, vigils, and lectures.⁵³ In response to the question "Why did you choose to participate in the above event(s)?" and "In your opinion, what is the purpose of the protests outside Iran?" this common theme was recurrent:

"To show people in this country and in Iran that Iranians abroad are opposed to the current government and, perhaps more broadly, the Iranian theocracy"

"Because the stories of human rights violations in Iran should be broadcast"

"Bringing awareness to the world about the struggles of people of Iran"

"Mainly to bring awareness for non-Iranian community"

"Raise awareness in America"

"Raise awareness in my local community"

In response to the question "What is the best way to help protesters in Iran?" approximately 60 percent of respondents again emphasized the importance of facilitating the spread of information:

"Transferring reliable information to/from Iranian community, inform public outside of Iran about the movement and asking the international community for support"

"To assure that news in Iran is transmitted to the world and that the opinions of Iranians in Iran is shared"

"Keep the information flowing"

"Showing support and spreading the news to the world"

"Helping Europeans to learn what is exactly in Iran" [*sic*]

"With foreign media being banned from covering the protests and issues in Iran, we need to help them get the news and videos and photos out of Iran. Especially translating them to English for non-Farsi speaking audiences"

"To spread the news (sharing videos on Facebook, allocating posts on our blogs)"

"Support networks of news distribution and continue to arrange gatherings, protests, lectures . . . aimed at non-Iranians as well, trying to inform them and eliminate the isolation of Iranians inside and outside Iran"

The sense of importance or responsibility in informing a non-Iranian public about the situation in Iran was a strong theme in my interviews with Iranians participating in protests in Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto. In some cases, Iranians felt a responsibility to provide information to a non-Iranian public. Two Iranian Americans I interviewed in Southern California explained their motivation for participating in or organizing interviews about the situation in Iran:

53. The online survey was administered between November and December 2009, using snowball sampling. Surveys were completed by Iranians or people of Iranian descent in North America and Europe. Respondents identified where they and their parents were born. Data presented in this article reflect the responses by Iranians living outside Iran and people living in North America or Europe with Iranian ancestry.

[I participated] because I felt like the government was trying to silence anything coming out of Iran and I felt like I should try to amplify the voices of people inside Iran to the international community. I also did interviews because I felt I can join other Iranians in trying to explain things to American media—which in my opinion often gets things wrong (male, Orange County, 65)

I organized an interview to get the word out to a much larger non-Iranian audience (female, Los Angeles, 30)

The prominence of social media in the postelection context has presented both unique opportunities for “getting the word out” and media-specific challenges. The speed of circulation and ability to repost images, videos, and messages has helped to broadcast news from Iran and challenge the “official” Iranian government account through eyewitness reports, but at the same time, these very features have made it more difficult for Iranian immigrants (who are deeply invested in the representation of Iran) to control and contextualize this information. A survey of the debates that have arisen in the diaspora around Iranian American literature, diasporic film, and other representations of “Iran” or “Iranian culture” suggests that Iranian identity in America is always overdetermined by the political context of U.S.-Iran relations (and the hostile climate faced by Iranian immigrants).⁵⁴

The goal of awareness always involves interpretation, and this has been a point of

contention because of the varying ways that Iranians around the world have “read” (given meaning to) the events in Iran. Furthermore, this concern over representation—specifically representation to an “outside” audience/on a “global stage”—marks the difference between the claims to community by the protesters within Iran (who are making not a political claim based on an essentialized identity but a claim to civil rights) and Iranians abroad.⁵⁵

The demonstrations held at the Federal Building in Los Angeles on 16 June 2009 were some of the largest outside Iran, but unlike the division between the pro-Mousavi and pro-Ahmadinejad supporters on the streets in Iran, these demonstrations showed a divide between different generations of Iranian immigrants.⁵⁶ One scene from the protests, which was videotaped and uploaded to CNN’s iReport on 17 June, demonstrates this clearly.⁵⁷ The video showed footage from a large demonstration on 16 June 2009 in Westwood, California (at the corner of Veteran Avenue and Wilshire Boulevard). Two large groups of Iranian Americans are gathered on opposite sides of Wilshire Boulevard. One side comprises primarily pro-Mousavi supporters. These (younger) demonstrators were primarily dressed in green and many of them were covering their faces with bandanas or surgical masks. The most prominent signs held by these younger protesters read “Where Is My Vote?” and they were chanting slogans such as, “Mousavi! Mousavi!” and “I will kill! I will kill! He who kills my brother!” (in Per-

54. In particular, the Iranian revolution (1978–79), the hostage crisis (1979–80), and the mass migration of Iranians abroad (1978–86) shaped the way both the Islamic Republic and the American mass media have represented Iranians. (See Edward Said, *Covering Islam* [New York: Vintage Books, 1981].) Such representations are important to Iranian immigrants, as they constitute the dominant representation of Iran that shaped their experience of “being Iranian” outside of Iran. These specific narratives of Iranianness, propagated by both the Islamic Republic and American mass media, were seen as problematic by the early waves of Iranian immigrants, who did not feel adequately represented by either. These hegemonic narratives are a constant background to the struggles over representation. See Mohsen Mobasher, “Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation among Iranian Immigrants in the United States,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 50 (2006): 100–117; and *I Call Myself Persian* (documentary film, dir., Tanaz Eshaghian and Sara Nodjumi, Third World Newsreel, United States, 2002).

55. Andrew Shryock, *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

56. Although many Iranian immigrants who left Iran as part of the early waves of immigration (1950–86) have not traveled regularly to Iran in the past three decades (either for fear of political dangers or simply because they have few family members residing in Iran), their emotional investments in Iran have for the most part remained constant. More recent waves of Iranians immigrants since 2001 have largely comprised people on temporary work (H-1) or student (F-1) visas, as well as refugees, most of whom migrate alone, leaving close family members in Iran. In my research among Iranian graduate students in California (the location of the largest Iranian population outside of Iran), many of these recent immigrants forcefully claim to be more “in touch” with the realities of Iran as compared to the earlier generations of immigrants. See Janet Alexanian, “Publicly Intimate Online: Iranian Web Blogs in Southern California,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa*

and the Middle East 26 (2006): 134–45. In either case, the investments and connections maintained to Iran by Iranian immigrants demonstrate the political, social, and economic processes that extend beyond the borders of a particular state, creating transnational migrants who “live their lives across borders.” Nina Glick Schiller, “Transmigrants and Nation-States: Something Old and Something New in the U.S. Immigrant Experience,” in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, ed. Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind (New York: Russell Sage, 1999), 96.

57. TehrAngeles, “Protest against Election Fraud in Iran: Federal Building Los Angeles,” CNN iReport, 17 June 2009, www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-273363.

sian), “Death to the Dictator!” (in Persian), and “Where is my vote?” (in English). The other side of the street is occupied by a noticeably older crowd (hereafter the antiregime side) holding flags of the prerevolutionary era and chanting anti-Islamic Republic slogans such as “Death to the Islamic Republic!” and “Death to the dictator!” (in Persian). The signs on this side of the street also reflect this message and read (in English) “Human Rights for Iran,” “We Want Freedom Now,” “Down with the Islamic Republic,” and “Boycott Phony Elections in Iran.”

During the course of the protests, one young woman from the pro-Mousavi side comes over to the antiregime side and confronts an older male protester who is holding a prerevolutionary Iranian flag. The young woman points to the older man’s flag (of the sun and lion, no longer used in the Islamic Republic) and yells, “Why do you have this flag? We are not holding flags! We are standing for the students!” The two begin arguing about which flag best represents the motives of the protesters in Iran and, therefore, which should be used in the demonstrations in support of those protesters. Other demonstrators begin arguing with each other. The confrontations continue and escalate to grabbing and pulling the large flags, yanking a bandana off a protester’s face, and even pushing an older woman to the ground. Eventually, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) gets involved and breaks up the clash between the two groups of protesters.

Such confrontations, while unusual in a public setting, reflect the struggles over representation of Iran, which have been performed through media over the past three decades.⁵⁸ These public confrontations disrupt the image of a unified Iranian immigrant community—the very image the demonstrations attempt to create. Whether organized to show Americans that Iranians, too, want freedom and human rights or to support Iranian activists by publi-

cizing their plight, the protesters demonstrate their transnational ties to Iran (as a real geographical location or an imagined past/future) as well as their concerns over how Iran is represented. The protesters contested other interpretations of the unrest in Iran—whether on Western news channels, Iranian American satellite television, the Islamic Republic state discourse, or the protesters across the street on Wilshire Boulevard.

While this scene demonstrates the competing interpretations of what the demonstrators in Iran want and how best to support them, the online discussion in response to the video of the scene described above (which was featured on the “iReport” section of CNN’s Web site) was revealing of the passionate stakes people held in how Iran and the “Iranian community” are represented to a global audience.⁵⁹ The heated exchange that unfolded in the comments section for the video involved both Iranians outside Iran and American readers. The comments began with a set of critiques of the protesters themselves, posted by people identifying as both Iranians and non-Iranian. The following are excerpts from the Web site (postings that were originally written in Persian using roman script have been marked by an asterisk):

1. Ummmm, yeah wear a scarf over your face in stereotypical “terrorist” fashion, that makes you sympathetic.
2. You guys can’t even get along at your own protest? Seriously, you’re gonna get violent right there in the street?
3. So, you are there for the ISLAMIC republic, and lighting your SHABBOS candles? Irony? (Posted by PinkLife, 17 June, 5:15 PST)

I think the police and medical personnel have better things to do, than babysit a bunch of fools out protesting. I have no problem with decent [*sic*]. But do it over there, not here. (Posted by gpNV, 17 June, 5:15 PST)

58. Persian-language satellite television programs, newspapers, and Web sites have been a common place for such debates. In the 2009 postelection protests, many videos of demonstrations in the diaspora have circulated on YouTube, showing the various groups within the diaspora, as well as confrontations like the one described above. For a similar confrontation in Toronto, see, e.g., TOGirlTube, “Confrontation,” 22 June 2009, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=foJHIBiPdai&feature=related.

59. As a part of the “iReport” section of CNN’s Web site, editors of the site choose a popular and compelling video (shot and uploaded by a “citizen reporter”) about a heated news topic to feature on this page. From 15 June to 25 June 2009, many of the videos chosen were directly related to the postelection protests in Iran. The video of the clash between protesters described above was featured for several days, beginning on June 17. TehrAngeles, “Protest against Election Fraud in Iran.”

I have no problem with the demonstration, I do have a problem that these Irani/Americans, are not showing the flag of the country that took them in when they left their country in fear, the Stars and Stripes. I do hope the people in Iran demonstrating will be protected, not injured, arrested or slain. I do wish them the freedom they are looking for. All countries should be free as we are in the USA. Bless America. (Posted by Calnative, 17 June, 5:44 PST)

Many comments were posted by people who did not identify as Iranian and who addressed their critical comments to Iranian Americans. These comments reflect xenophobic attitudes and stereotypical views of Muslims and Middle Eastern people. In response to these postings, Iranian American participants in the discussion posted comments both directed at other Iranians (written in Persian using roman script) and in response to the negative comments directed to them by non-Iranians. The comments directed to “insiders” emphasized that a positive representation of Iranians to outsiders should be the foremost goal, and as a result, divisions within the Iranian population should not be publicized:

Baba, be ashamed, I can't even leave a comment in English because I am so embarrassed. When you are in front of so many people from different countries, why do you do these things? Who cares why or on whose behalf you came, baba, be together. One hand does not make a sound . . . chill . . . pleaseeeeeeeeeeeeeee⁶⁰
(Posted by Nina26, 18 June, 8:20 PST)*

Video of Iranians demonstrating in Los Angeles and FIGHTING. . . . WHY WHY WHY must we do this in front of world media?? THIS ONLY MAKES US sooo stupid. And then we get upset when others say “No wonder their country is in pieces, look at them.” (Posted by Narmin Nikki [Toronto, ON], 18 June, 9:56 PST)

The emphasis on showing unity recurs throughout the forum, as does the concern over how the Iranian community is seen by outsiders. Perhaps

in response to the plea by Nina26 to avoid writing critical comments in English (so to avoid the outsider's gaze), a heated exchange between two Iranian participants was subsequently posted in Persian (below is a translation):

nina26,
in Houston they surrounded me and insisted I bring my flag down. We are not interfering with them, they are the ones who are bugging us, the same thing happened in LA and San Diego. But in Houston I told them that if they want freedom, raise your own flag and I will raise my own. These are the Islamic Republic's people, they want to start fights⁶¹ (Posted by brianhouston, 18 June, 8:20 PST)*

brianhoustontexasneocon:
you really are a traitor . . . this being a Shah supporter is what has caused them to attack and begin beating students . . . you are really shameless . . . a person does not lie to his own countrymen . . . liar! Liar!⁶² (Posted by freethep, 18 June, 8:20 PST)*

This video is amazing. I was at the protest yesterday. The group of Iranians who refused to carry the flag of our country are pathetic and shameful. These people are the supporters of the current regime. They had their faces covered like cowards! Who are you afraid of? You are NOT in Iran. Majority of students and people in Iran are not covering their faces, and you are!! What a joke. They claim to be supporting the students. BS. They are so ignorant as to associate our country's flag with the Shahi people. I am not a Shahi you morons just because I carry that flag. . . . I was forced to leave when I was 7 and I have not stepped foot on the soil of my country because I refuse this regime. (Posted by margbarmulah, 17 June, 3:15 PST)

As has been common in discussions taking place in the diaspora about the postelection protests in Iran, many comments specifically questioned whether the people representing Iran (in this case, the Iranian protesters in Los Angeles) are *really* representative of Iranians or the protest movement. Another example is this one: “pa-

60. Original post: “Baba khejalat bekeshid, hata nemitonam be englisi comment bezaram az khejalat. chera vaghty jeloyee inhame adam az keshvarayee mokhtalef khodetoon ro neshon midid in karharo mikoneed. aslan who cares ke az tarafe chi o ki omadeed baba baham basheed,ye dast seda nadare chill pleaseeeeeeeeeeeeeee.”

61. Original post: “mano to houston doram kardan ke parchamamo biaram pain ma bahashon kari nadarim ina gir dadan az aval to la ba san diego ham hamintor shodeh. vali to houstonam beheshon goftam mikhain azadi bia toboro parchame khodeto boland kon man parchame khodamo ina adamaye jomhorie eslami hastan mikhan dava rah bendazan.”

62. Original post: “toh kheyli vatan foorooshi . . . in shahi boodan keh be daneshjuha hamleh kardan va shoоро kardan bezadan . . . kheyli bisharafi . . . adam be hamvatan dooroogh nemige . . . doorooghgoo! doorooghgoo!”

thetic . . . these are upper crust elites whose progenitors looted irans wealth during the shahs time and are now jumping on the political band wagon because there is an ‘upheavl’ in iran. These people are the minority and represent the fringe” (posted by frontierfox, 17 June, 5:38 PST). These posts demonstrate the complex divisions within the Iranian population, which are not limited to religious orientation or geographic location but also include markers of identity such as political orientation. Following these posts, several non-Iranians added further insulting comments, which spurred responses by the Iranian participants—both in English (directed at the posters) and to other Iranians (written in Persian). These exchanges suggest that Iranian participants modify their comments depending on the perceived audience:

If they were real grown ups they wouldn’t be on the streets arguing like 10 yr olds when it is accomplishing nothing. (Posted by mdw77, 18 June, 8:20 PST)

You are just jealous of Iranians. Unlike you we can protest. Unlike you we are humans and have feelings. For us, it is normal to get angry and show our emotions, we are good humans with high moral standards and have a great culture. Something which you never have had. (Posted by Harmless, 18 June, 8:20 PST)

I know its normal for you people to show your anger you people are always blowing people up. (Posted by mdw77, 18 June, 8:20 PST)

Brian and freetehp:

Baba, don’t fight. Right now all of you are needed, regardless of whether you are a shah-supporter or mujahidin or anything else that divides Iranians. Don’t fight pleaseeeee we are all Iranians and for our country we want freedom and SARBOLANDI, and we have to be able to respect each other’s views, whatever that is Shah and Islamic Republic both have

bad and good elements, maybe a little more or less, but right now belief is all that is needed is plus, I dont think this Mousavi guy is anygood, anyway. He is still one of the islamic regim people Let’s ask for change not for Mousavi⁶³ (Posted by Nina26, 18 June, 8:20 PST)*

nina26 agree bro (Posted by brianhouston, 18 June, 8:20 PST)

To all non-Iranian participants:

We all appreciate your time and concern in regards to watching our news, but please try to respect our people and their feelings as most of us are going through a rough time by either going through the memory lane remembering 10 years ago or some are in situations where they have less tolerance to deal with some bitter comments,

Thank you all again,

God bless, Nina

(Posted by Nina26, 18 June, 8:20 PST)

so you come here to wave your flag? go back to iran little jihadist (Posted by mdw77, 18 June, 9:20 PST)

this video is truly embarrassing. People in Iran are giving their lives and meanwhile these idiots here in this videos are fighting like cats and dogs. What savage people. . . . Post videos of Iranian unity, of the support of the people in Iran. If you don’t have any, then please do not post these insulting and shameful videos either . . . !!⁶⁴ (Posted by Antilife, 18 June, 9:20 PST)*

Baba, whatever fights you have with each others’ viewpoints, please at least write them in Farsi. Let’s not bring ourselves down so low in front of these white people. We have much more culture than them—too much to allow a few ignorant people to insult us just because you insist on fighting here. We are all Iranians and proud SO please come together and help each other rebuild Iran.⁶⁵ (Posted by Nina26, 18 June, 9:20 PST)*

63. Original post: “Brian and freetehp: baba dava nakoneed,alan be hameyee shomaha niaz hast,che padeshahi,che tarafdare mojahed va che har chize digeyee ke irani ha ro daste bandi mikone. Dont fight pleaseeeee ma hame irani hasteem va barayee vatanemoon azadi va sarbolandi mikhayeem,va bayad betooneem ke be eteghadate ham dige ehteram bezareem,whatever that is shah va jomhori islami har kodom ham badi daran va ham khobi,hala yekam bishtar ya kamtar,vali alan faghat etehad lazem hast plus, I dont

think this Mousavi guy is anygood, anyway. He is still one of the islamic regim people Let’s ask for change not for Mousavi.”

64. Original post: “in yek videoye kamelan khejalat avare. mardom daran to Iran khon midan, onvaght in ahmagha inja daran mesle sago gorbe be ham miparan. che adamaye vahshiii film az eetehade iraniya bezarid,az supporteshon nesbat be mardome toye Iran. age ke nadarid pas plz az in nemone video-haye maskhare o shameful ham nazariid . . . !!”

65. Original post: “Baba,har davayee dareed ba eteghadayee hamdige pleaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaase be farsi benevisid hadeaghal.beyayn inghad khodemon ro jeloyee in sefidayee bisavad payeen naryareem.Ma khailii ba farhangtar az in hasteem ke chand ta bisavad bekhan ma ro be maskhare begiran faghat barayee inke shomaha mikhayeem inja yar keshi koneed.Ma hame Irani hasteem va proud SO please beyayn ba ham va ba komak hamdige Iran ro dobare besazeem.”

Nina26's repeated appeals to present a united front to outsiders (non-Iranians) were well received by other Iranian forum participants who obliged. Comments posted in English were written on behalf of a community (e.g., "unlike *you*, *we* can protest" and "*we* are good humans with high moral standards and have a great culture" [emphasis added]) and countered the stereotypes and insults directed toward Iranians (e.g., "*you guys* can't even get along at your own protest," "it's normal for *you people* to show your anger *you people* are always blowing people up," and "go back to Iran you little jihadist" [emphasis added]). This need to exhibit unity in the face of xenophobia and anti-Muslim comments overrides the reality of divisions and diversity within the Iranian population in the United States. While the Persian-language debates on the forum (much like similar debates on "insider" spaces such as Iranian.com) demonstrate the inner diversity and conflict within the diaspora, this reality must be effaced in order to construct a unified representation of "Iranian culture" to outsiders.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The demonstrations in the diaspora in support of the protesters in Iran are unable to transcend the challenge of representation. In an immigrant context, public performances involve speaking as an Iranian and, in doing so, representing *the* Iranian community on a global stage. In attempting to do so, one inevitably faces the challenge of representing diversity as unity. In defining "our culture," what is necessarily excluded?

The participation of diasporic Iranians in supporting Iranians in Iran in the post-election aftermath demonstrates the political stakes they hold in the future of Iran. How Iran is represented globally matters, not only to the geopolitical future of Iranians in Iran, but also to the ways Iranians are treated in immigrant contexts. Iranian immigrants' identities are tied to the global dominant representations of Iran. Attempts to disrupt these narratives by provid-

ing alternative representations of Iranianness inevitably face the problem of excluding others who do not fit into such a constructed unity. However, demonstrations within Iran following the 2009 election do signal new possibilities for political action: across class, generation, religious, and political lines, Iranians have joined together to protest a violation of their political rights and form a community based not on defining a unified identity but on a common political imperative.⁶⁷ §

66. See the discussion of "communities of suffering" in Pnina Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (New Mexico: School of American Research, 2002).

67. This concept of community is informed by Jean Luc-Nancy's concept of "inoperative community" in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).